
New Saga of Gender Friendliness (Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns)

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Abstract: *Throwing light on the condition of Muslim women particularly in the third world countries some of the women concerning issues are taken up again and again on national and international platform. The tradition bound and fundamental societies in such countries make the life of women challenging and difficult to bear. Adhering to the context of gender disparity and exploitation, Hosseini's 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' presents out saga of feminine woe successfully. The book focuses on the real ground of Afghanistan with the hope of gradual molding of gender friendliness that may ensure some possibilities of true progress. The present paper aims to present an attempt by the young generation writers like Hosseini who try to change the current scenario of the third world countries' women's prevalent condition, endorsing to progress and gender friendly atmosphere.*

Key words: Gender disparity, gender friendliness, third world countries, tradition, patriarchy.

Introduction

“I am the one from whose lap you picked flowers
And then poured flames and thorns instead
For you never knew
That chains can not hide the fragrance of flowers.”

The lines by Kishwar Naheed from the poem Who am I? translated by Rukhsana Ahmed poignantly bring out the condition of women behind the veil of the third world countries even in 21st century. With varied changing concepts the world is chasing the path of matured thought and understanding that demands the demolition of the walls of religion, cast, community and gender. On one hand the developed countries embarking upon gender friendliness atmosphere by providing platforms to women in different section of the society, on the other hand third world countries are still facing gender disparity and struggling to change the mind set of the society. They are trying to alter the social set up with gender friendly atmosphere in every sphere at community and family levels. Throwing light on the condition of Muslim women particularly in the third world countries some of the women concerning issues are taken up again and again on national and international platform. As far as cardinal principles in Islam and Sharia claim, the equality and justice to each individual in prevalent situation is seen in contrast.

Muslim jurists claim and all Muslims believe that justice and equality are intrinsic values and cardinal principles in Islam and the Shria. If this is the case in a state that claims to be guided by the Sharia, why are justice and equality not reflected in the laws that regulate gender relations and the rights of men and women? Why do Islamic jurisprudential texts – which define the term of the Sharia – treat women as second class citizens and place them under men dominations? (Hosseini, 629)

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Khalid Hosseini is the budding name in the field of English fiction. His writing characterises lively, realistic pen portraits from Afghanistan. Three novels are to his credit so far: *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountain Echoed*. He was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1965 where his father was a diplomat and his mother taught Farsi and history. During the Russian invasions the family moved to United States in 1980.

A Thousand Splendid Suns: Carves a novel feminine niche

In the arena of third world literature, with the feminine characters full of blood and flesh, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* brings out the tale of Afghan women on the background of war, hunger and political anarchy. It is the saga of oppression under patriarchy, the women experienced in the traditional Afghan society presenting them in the worst condition during the period of war. The novel presents the picture of Afghanistan between 1970 and 2003. The novel presents realistic picture of rural Afghan women in Afghanistan where the male rule is the ultimate. In his speech delivered at Book Expo America on 2nd June, 2007 Hosseini expresses, 'Where as Kabul has been relatively speaking, a hub for female autonomy, rural Afghanistan, especially south and east along the border with Pakistan, has been traditionally a patriarchal tribal region where men have decided the fates of women'(410). On this background of tradition bound society for women, Hosseini's skill as a writer can be seen as a visionary to predict an optimistic picture to Afghan women, crossing the boundaries set to them. He successfully brings out the wonderful understanding between two women for which the novel is commended. He presents hideous picture of patriarchy in all its oppressive form denying the basic fundamental rights of the fair sex, which results in violent eruption of the victimized seeking final emancipation from the strangle hold

Hosseini's presentation of the characters under the horrible and insecure shadow of war is applauded by *The Guardian* as, 'Hosseini vividly brings home what life is like for women... he makes the Afghans come alive as loving, feeling individuals.' The novel unfolds various layers of Afghan women's psyche who have been living a framed life shaped by fundamentalism. Social and religious stringent regulations have constrained their lives. The skill of Hosseini can be seen in unveiling the kind woman heart, genuine humane attitude and soft feelings which Mariam and Laila feel for each other. Despite cruel web of life, both of them empathies one another. Though they are the wives of Rasheed, successfully weave the beautiful relation of mother-daughter with bond of care and understanding for each other. Since a century, literature has been exposing feminism either from submissive or rebellious point of view, but Hosseini has brought out a wonderful aspect of feminism with empathy which woman feels for other woman with natural emotional mind set, she lives and experiences.

Mariam: Victim of Social, Fundamental Approach

Hosseini depicts women characters from two diverse social set ups. Mariam, the product of Jalil's infatuation for Nana, maid working in his house and Laila, beloved daughter of educated and caring father, brought up in well educated and liberal family of Babi. Both of them represent the life lived by the Afghan women in rural and urban area respectively. Mariam, the Harami, has not seen the world outside her mother's small house and village. Though Nana, Mariam's mother speaks out her frustration for deceived by Jalil and for not shouldering his responsibilities towards Nana and Mariam, Miriam yearns for her father's presence in life. Nana's pain of rejection can be seen when she says, 'Jalil didn't have the dil to do the honorable thing' (7). Hence though Mariam is the

daughter of Jalil, one of the wealthiest men owns cinema house in Heerat, she lives as 'a harami, an unwanted thing; that she was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance' (4). Though attached to Nana, Mariam possesses a great fascination for her father. When Jalil visits Mariam and Nana she sits on his lap and listens the stories. It is the innocent and harmless world which Mariam believes to be beautiful and enjoys the same. She waits for her father on every Thursday and adores the gifts given by him. Dispite the warning given by Nana not to cross the boundary of Heerat and visit Jalil's house, an impulse to see the world of the dear father makes Mariam to lose her mother.

Loneliness and disillusionment experienced by Mariam after the death of Nana makes her realize the unfortunate fact Nana bears throughout her life, 'Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always, you remember that, Mariam' (7). At Jalil's house Mariam is surrounded by his three wives and nine legitimate children. They all are strangers to her and she feels outsider. Within a few days the wives of Jalil bring a proposal of Rasheed a man of forty five, thirty years older than Mariam. Rasheed possesses a strong qualification for a groom as he has his own house, settled business and his wife is dead ten years ago and his son drowns three years back. Mariam does not have any option but to accept the proposal as Jalil's family has been 'disgraced by her birth and this is their chance to erase once and for all, the last trace of their husband's scandalous mistake. She is being sent away because she is the walking, breathing embodiment of their shame (48). As a writer, Hosseini brings out the submissive attitude of Mariam to cope up with the new set up at Rasheed's house.

After marriage, Mariam lives life within the four walls of Rasheed's house. In the beginning she feels uprooted, displaced and like an intruder in someone else's life. Rasheed does not bear with this attitude of Mariam and says, 'I expect you to start behaving like a wife, Fahmidi. Is that understood?' (63). Mariam copes up with the condition and tries to suit herself in the frame of Rasheed's wife. She takes care of her home, wears burqua, tries to keep her husband happy with preparing different food for him. Rasheed expects back his son from Mariam. Mariam's sincere desire to fulfil the desire of her husband presents her as a genuine representative of the women folk in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, every month perturbation disheartens her and proves her unproductive and hence useless in the eyes of Rasheed. Her inner desire to experience motherhood and frustration makes her depressed. Her disappointment and dread of going outside depicts the unfulfilled life of a woman in fundamental society when she is incapable of bearing a child. She feels envious suddenly of the neighbourhood women and their wealth of children. It is the burden of conservative Afghan society which sees the fulfillment of life of woman in the role of wife and mother only. The society does not accept the independent personality of a woman at home or outside. Gradually, Rasheed's changes his behavior to Mariam. She constantly lives in fear of his shifting and uncertain mood. Within four years of marriage Mariam realizes 'how much a woman can tolerate when she is afraid' (97). Many times Mariam proves victim to his wrath. He slaps her, kicks her violently and Miriam tolerates all. Miriam seems to be the symbol of all the Afghan women who are expected to be the silent followers of the structure made for them by their society. Mariam shows the woman's strength to endure the adversities stoically. Natural feelings like jealousy, comparison, insecurity of a common woman can be seen in her treatment to Laila when Laila enters in her house as Rasheed's third wife.

Peeping through the window of Genderfriendliness

Humanitarian liberal attitude to women is creeping in the third world Muslim countries with a slow pace. Young and educated generation looks forward for positive changes. Diasporic gaze in this regard is of great significance. Hosseini's skillful presentation of the character with grit is remarkable, Laila speaks volume of the same spirit. Unlike Mariam, Laila is born and brought up in a liberal atmosphere. Her father is the supporter of women's education. She is a beautiful girl with shoulder length, blond curls, thick-lashed turquoise green eyes dimpled cheeks and bold attitude. Babi encourages her to get education. His encouraging words, 'Marriage can wait but education can not. You are a very very bright girl. Truly you are..... I also know that when this is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, may be even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated' (114) shape the personality of Laila. Her teacher calls her 'Inqilabi Girl' Revolutionary girl and heartens her for modern and broad outlook an Afghan woman needs to live in the society. In her young age, the same views are supported by Tarik. Tarik is an educated young man who does not possess a typical fundamental attitude. She enjoys Tarik's company. She dreams of happy world and security in the company of Tarik and his family. Despite the clashes between her parents she gets the strong support from them to be built up as an entity with her own views and thoughts. After this positive phase of life, predicaments knock the door of Laila's life when Tarik says to her that he is leaving Afghanistan. It is the first jolt she receives as repercussion of war. Tarik and his family abandon their home and flee from Afghanistan to settle in neighboring country like Pakistan or Iran. He unveils his heart and offers his proposal of marriage. Thinking about her father's condition if she leaves him, she refuses the proposal of Tarik. With heavy heart Tarik departs leaving Laila with the promise to come back. Disillusionment and disturbing war conditions in Afghanistan make the life of Afghan people uncertain and insecure. Laila proves the victim to this pessimistic phase of disturbed Afghan community. She loses everything and everyone. Badly injured she comes to know about her pregnancy the result of her true love and pure emotions for Tarik. Rasheed gives her shelter with an intension to marry her and have a son. Astutely, Rasheed informs her about the death of Tarik. Now he is of sixty or so but his hold on his home as the bread winner of the family is intact. He governs the house by keeping Mariam under his word. Fearing that conservative Afghan society will not accept Tarik's baby in her womb without the sanction of marriage, Laila hurriedly accepts the proposal of Rasheed and paves the way for her baby for legitimate birth which is the only memory of Tarik. She endures the wrath and rejection by Mariam in the beginning as an intruder claiming the same right as Rasheed's wife.

Hosseini has wonderfully presented the natural reactions of two women when they are placed in unwanted conditions of life. Their relation begins with the natural feeling of jealousy and hatred but Laila provides sanctuary for Mariam through love that she and her children sharing with valuable sense of belongingness and purpose, which she is deprived of since her childhood. Mariam's involvement with Laila and her children gradually strengthens and her strong affinity and affection for them can be seen in the climax of the novel when she sacrifices her life for the better future of Laila and her children. Not only she saves Laila from death but she also provides the chance and inspiration for Laila to realize her full potential. (Rebecca, 58)

After marrying Rasheed, Laila accepts all the restrictions he imposes on her. She wears burqua, endures the beating of Rasheed many times. Suddenly Tarik comes back and visits her. She comes to know the wicked plan made by Rasheed and the way he deceives her. By that time

Mariam successfully accepts the presence of Laila and her daughter as members of her own family. The concern she feels for Laila brings out the natural feelings of love and affection a woman feels for other woman crossing the bindings of man made relations. At the time of Laila's second delivery she takes care of her like her mother. Tarik's come-back in the life of Laila makes her to remember all the beautiful and delicate moments again she enjoyed in her previous life. Mariam and Laila's plan to leave Kabul and from Rasheed's cage, fails and Mariam and Laila pay for it harshly. Rasheed beats them ruthlessly. He warns,

'You try this again and I will find you. I swear on the Prophet's name that I will find you. And, when I do, there isn't a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do. To Mariam first, then to her, and you last. I'll make you watch. You understand me? I'll make you watch' (265).

Women in Afghanistan suffer oppression and abuse at home and outside. Research by Global Rights estimates that almost nine out of ten Afghan women face physical, sexual or psychological violence or are forced to marriage (aljazeera.com). In the novel, Laila and Miriam's life after marriage bring out the same picture. The condition of women in Afghanistan is that the society does not accept the equal status for women in or outside the home. Male domination overpowers and the presence of women is overshadowed by the same. UN Data Sources show that 85% of women have no formal education and are illiterate (trustineducation.org). Rasheed's attitude and behavior speaks volumes in this regard. Hosseini has presented this bitter reality very effectively. After Talibani's take over of Afghanistan, the existence in the country is presented as more difficult for women outside the four walls. The conditions are worst due to severe drought in the summer 2000. Suspecting Laila's relations with Tarik, Rasheed's wrath knows no bound and he beats Mariam and Laila again. He beats Laila with a belt with 'brass buckle' (337). He beats Mariam with the same belt when she tries to shield Laila. 'He caught her, threw her up against the wall, and struck her with the belt again and again, the buckle slamming against her chest, her shoulder, her raised arms, her fingers, drawing blood wherever it struck' (338). He is about to kill Laila, Mariam gets the shovel and hits Rasheed and saves Laila and her daughter.

Here Hosseini has presented the act of rebellion by a woman against the unbearable and repressive patriarchy and male dominance. It seems that at this moment 'this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life'(341). A trial is carried out after the killing of Rasheed by Mariam but she does not feel any kind of regret as she does it to save the life of Laila and her daughter. In the company of Laila she lives happily. She weaves the relationship of friend, companion and guardian with Laila. She becomes 'Mother' of her husband's wife. She sacrifices her life so that Laila can get a new beginning with Tarik.

Rasheed and Jalil are presented as the instruments of conservative Afghan community which accept the existence of women as 'secondary' or 'non-exist'. At the age of sixty Rasheed needs a wife to bear his son. When Mariam proves unproductive to him he marries Laila with shrewd planning. He dares to behave like the same because the Afghan social structure permits 'man' to behave with woman like that. No such law exists in Afghanistan to protect women from such humiliation. Rasheed's attitude and behavior speaks volume of gender disparity in Afghanistan. Jalil's three marriages, his relations with maid, Nana, his ultimate rule in the house bring out the deeply rooted gender disparity which is based on real picture of Afghan society. The naked reality is presented as,

'women are pawned into marriages and not allowed to divorce, total obedience to the husband and his family is expected and women are prevented from getting education.

Women are perceived as the receptacles of 'honor' and hence they stay in the domestic sphere, observe the veil and are voiceless. The honor of the family, the tribe and ultimately the nation is invested in women' (Ghosh, 2-3).

This bleak and dark picture of present scenario is concluded with the optimistic climax of the novel where Laila begins a new life with Tarik. It is in his company Laila lives happily. Here the saga of gender friendliness commences with new hope. His love for Laila, his acceptance of her and her children show his faith, deep concern and sincere love for her. To live life with liberty and peace, a woman needs such positive support and faith. Tarik is like an ambassador for new life for Afghan women in future.

Conclusion

The factual picture of Afghanistan is based on the model of patriarchy focusing on gender disparity. Despite the reality, the modern generation wants a change. The matured youth thinks that unless the gender disparity is replaced with gender friendliness, the development of the third world countries will remain a dream. Hence the learned literates like Hosseini have heralded a new mindset with the projection of the characters living in gender friendly atmosphere. Miriam's acceptance of Laila as a daughter, her sacrifice of life for the better future of Laila, Tarik's acceptance of Laila, Babi's expectations from Laila and his support all are the dreamy pitfalls which expect the significant changes in conservative Afghan society to move towards modern and peaceful, healthy, sound Afghanistan in future. The foundation of gender friendly Afghanistan needs the strong support of broad minded, well educated male community. It needs the value of equality to be nurtured and bold support given to women by the women. Hosseini's expected future of Afghanistan is a place where women stand erect. His projection of the bold, intelligent and beautiful character of Laila is the picture of expected new generation of Afghan women to fly with the support of the society. Gender friendly atmosphere can make the picture a reality.

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